Art of Deception

THE CATSKILL FLYTYERS

By CECIL E. HEACOX

On the Neversink River at Hall Mills Bridge, a favorite stretch of Roy Steenrod's and the late Theodore Gordon's, I play a trout

I renew acquaintances with hallowed figures in the annals of American flyfishing

Walt Dette dresses fly at his tying bench in Roscoe. Walt helped design Coffin Fly, among other patterns

A REAL DRY-FLY fisherman's morning—just a whisper of a soft May breeze and a light cloud cover to mask shadows.

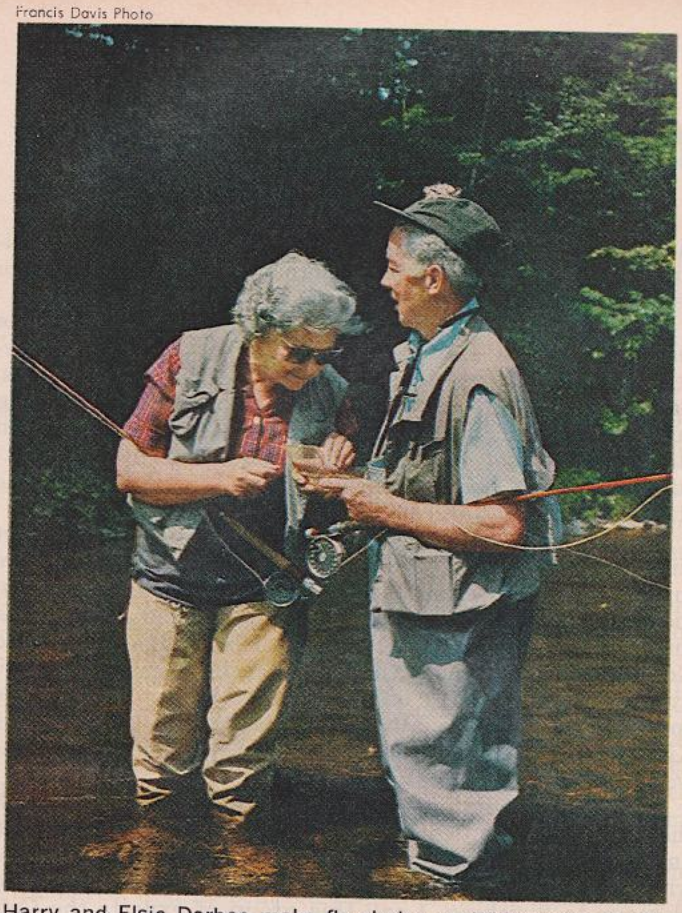
As I drove along the road winding down the flank of Slide Mountain, highest peak in New York's Catskills, the crystal-clear runs of the Neversink River dangled a lure no angler could resist. Near Hall Mills I pulled up along a private stretch of water where I had a standing invitation to fish.

I tied on a Quill Gordon and flicked it out to a likely-looking riff. For a flyfisherman, no experience is more loaded with potential excitement than watching a dry fly thread a current. My second cast brought a swirl; the third, a scrappy 10-inch brown trout. During the next hour, the Quill Gordon continued to work its magic. Three relatives of the first brown fulfilled their destiny. All were rewarded with their freedom.

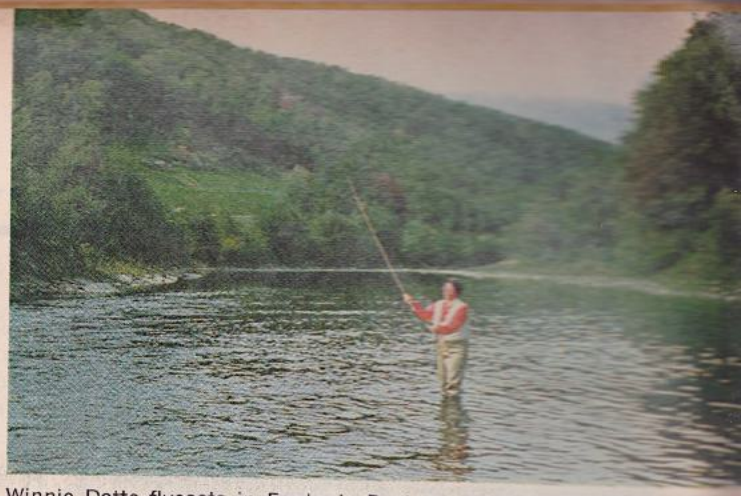
As I snipped off the Quill Gordon I thought of the wonderful hours that dry-fly fishing had given me. And I recalled that right here on the Neversink is where it all began.

It was back in 1882 when Theodore Gordon, a slight, frail

Francis Davis Photo



Harry and Elsie Darbee make fly choice on Willowemoc Creek



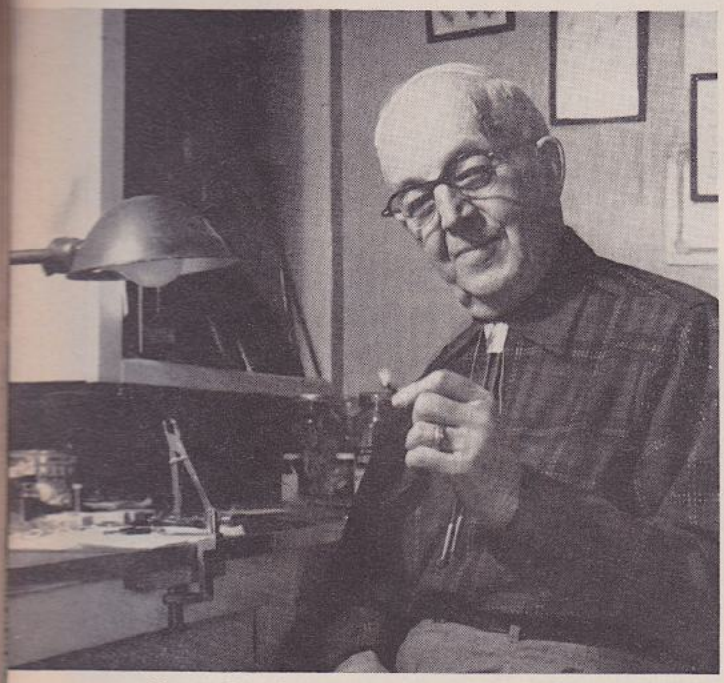
Winnie Dette flycasts in Ferdon's Pool on famous Beaver Kill

Popular Dry Flies of the Catskill School

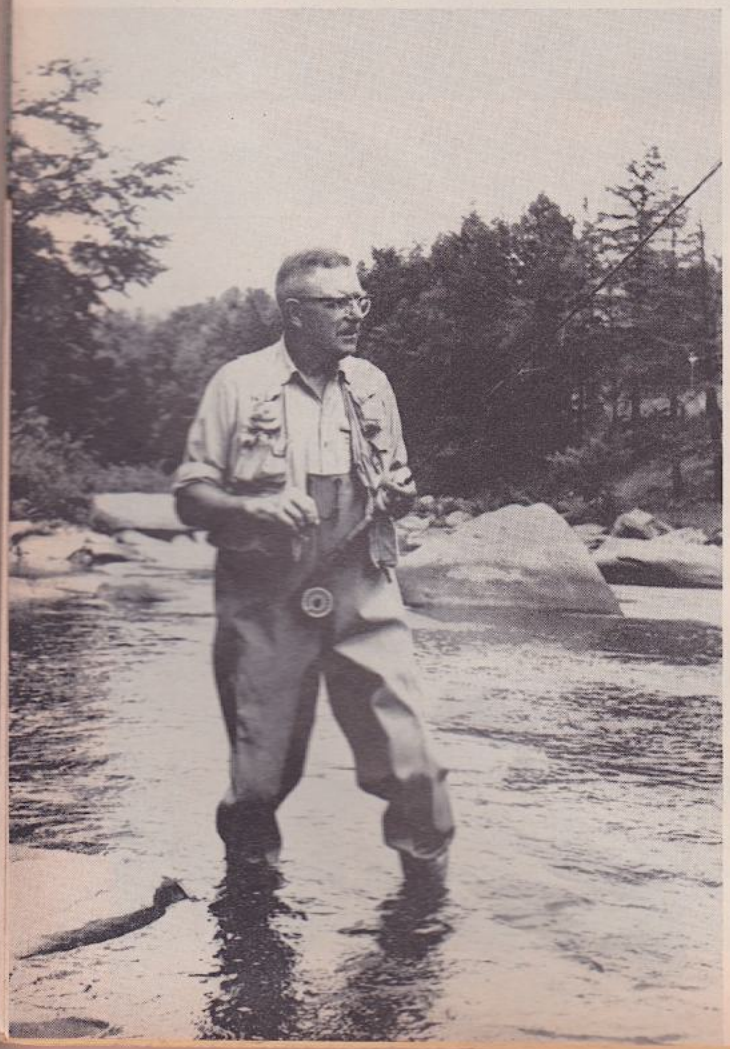
These potent bits of feather and curved steel were developed by Catskill tyers; table shows dressings of a particular tyer; each pattern has variations

Fly & Originator	Body	Hackle	Wings	Tail	Dressing Recommended By
A QUILL GORDON (Theodore Gordon)	quill with fine gold winding	dun	wood duck	2 barbs of stiff dun hackle	Roy Steenrod
B HENDRICKSON (Roy Steenrod)	red fox belly fur of several shades blended to make fawn color	dun – water color	wood duck	2 or 3 barbs of dun hackle	Roy Steenrod
C LIGHT CAHILL (American) (William Chandler)	light belly fur of red fox	very light ginger cock	flank feather of mandarin or wood duck drake	ginger cock's barbs	Will Chandler
D RED FOX (Ray Smith version)	buff and red belly fur of red fox	light buff ginger of minorca or leghorn	wood duck – brown breast feather	wood duck – brown breast feather	Ray Smith
E RED QUILL (American) (Art Flick)	stripped red hackle quill of Rhode Island red cock	dark natural dun	wood duck	hackle filament	Art Flick
F RAT-FACED McDOUGAL (Harry Darbee and Percy Jennings)	tan deer hair, clipped	dark ginger	cream grizzly hackle points (variation shown)	ginger	The Darbees
G COFFIN FLY (Walt Dette and Ted Townsend)	pig's wool or seal	medium dark yellow badger	black hackle points	wood duck	The Dettes
H LADY BEAVERKILL (George Cooper)	muskrat, with yellow egg sac	ginger	wood duck (variation shown)	ginger	The Darbees

THE CATSKILL FLYTYERS *continued*



Above, Roy Steenrod—dean of Catskill School, friend of Theodore Gordon's and developer of Hendrickson—at his tying bench. Below, Art Flick wades the Schoharie



man, came here after losing his money in a Georgia railroad, to become a Catskill Thoreau, devoting his life to fishing, flytying, and writing.

Eight years later Gordon made angling history when he queried Frederic Halford, noted British angler, and received 48 dry-fly patterns used on English chalk streams. Gordon spent the remaining 25 years of his life adapting and perfecting these prototypes to Catskill mountain streams. It's probable that some of his patterns were tested where I was fishing, since this was one of his favorite stretches on the Neversink.

Gordon was the right man in the right place at the right time. Brown trout, ideal quarry for the dry-fly angler, were introduced from Germany in 1883 and took hold in a genuine population explosion. Hiram Leonard's and Jim Payne's inspired fly rods provided better tools of the trade, and Gordon's new flies made the Catskills the Camelot for dry-fly fishermen. Starting on the Neversink with Gordon, the sport soon spread to other Catskill streams—the Beaver Kill, Willowemoc, Rondout, Esopus, Schoharie, and Delaware.

In Gordon's footsteps came other disciples. Inspired with the same zeal and dedication, all have been avid fishermen and innovative tyers, and many have been informative writers. Because they have added a special quality and glamour to flyfishing, I call this group of experts the Catskill School of Flytyers.

As I took my rod apart I reflected on the comforting stability of flyfishing in this shaky world: the sport is basically the same as it was in Gordon's day. No armchair angling for me this year. I would renew a 25-year acquaintance with the Catskill tyers and track down the story behind these potent bits of feather and curved steel.

A good starting point was Roy Steenrod, 90-year-old dean of the Catskill School, although he no longer ties for the market. He and Gordon were close friends; they fished and tied flies together.

I found Roy in his basement workshop in Liberty. The fishing season was closed, and he was surprised to see me. I settled down in an easy chair and watched him tie a fly as a favor to me. His hands, like mayfly spinners over a riff, hovered over a vise that once belonged to Theodore Gordon. Almost as quick as you can say "Hendrickson," a bare hook became that great trout-taker originated by Roy in 1916.

Every angler who has ever floated a dry fly in a glass of water and held it up to the light knows it is not a mirror image of the dun or spinner stages of the mayfly it seeks to imitate but an impressionistic interpretation of how the real insect looks to a trout in its watery home. As tied by Roy and other Catskill School tyers, the dry fly becomes a magnificent deception.

I first met Roy Steenrod, then area conservation officer, when my job as a fisheries biologist with the New York State Conservation Department brought me back in 1946 to the Catskill region I had known as a boy. Roy, respected throughout his area, helped me get off on the right foot in my new territory and introduced me to my first real dry-fly fishing on the famed Beaver Kill.

Roy and followers of Gordon have faithfully held to the maxims established by the master. The Catskill region has produced many fine flytyers, but certain names have added luster to the Catskill School: Art Flick, Ray Smith, Her-

man Christian, the two husband-wife teams of Walt and Winnie Dette and Harry and Elsie Darbee, and the late Reuben Cross and Edward Hewitt. Also Ellis Newman, whose untimely death in 1965 cut short a career as a highly respected member.

The Catskill School tyers have been great creators. From their vises have come such fly patterns as Coffin Fly, Conover, Cross Special, Gordon, Lady Beaverkill, Murray's Favorite, Neversink Skater, Rat-Faced McDougal, Red Fox, Red Quill, Woodruff, and several varieties of the Hair Wing Royal Coachman; and, of course, those classic American originals indelibly stamped with the Catskill hallmark: Quill Gordon, Light Cahill, and Hendrickson.

Walt Dette once said to me: "If a Catskill fisherman doesn't have a supply of these flies with him, he feels he's fishing naked."

Roy looked up from his vise and saw me gazing at a picture of Theodore Gordon fishing on the Neversink.

"As you can see," Roy said, "Mr. Gordon was not very rugged, but he had such an easy motion that he could cast for hours. I first met him around nineteen-O-one when I worked in the Liberty post office and he came in to mail flies to customers."

Gordon was the first American advocate of matching-the-hatch, and he believed that trout have a discerning eye for color. Most flyfishermen know the dry Quill Gordon as a pattern that's fairly standard in color. Gordon tied the Q. G., as he called it, in three different shades and reported a time when only the third variation was accepted by a steadily rising trout.

Gordon has been credited with originating the modern version of the Light Cahill. Roy, however, thinks William Chandler of Neversink should get the credit.

"But flytying was for off-season and rainy days," Roy said. "During the season, fishing always came first."

The two men had many favorite stretches between Hasbrouck and Hall Mills, most of them now inundated by Neversink Reservoir, part of the water-supply system for New York City.

"Mr. Gordon and I fished two or three pools apart and afterwards compared fishing, hatches, and stream conditions."

Though the two men were close friends, they remained on a "Mr. Gordon, Mr. Steenrod" basis. "He was a Southern gentleman who believed in old-fashioned courtesy," observed Roy, a Northern gentleman.

"For a good float, we dunked our flies in kerosene," Roy continued. "Mr. Gordon fished very little 'on spec,' as he called it. Instead of covering every likely spot, he studied currents and shadows before starting to cast. He loved to locate a big trout, and he was never satisfied until he landed it."

Besides priceless memories of the Gordon days, Roy inherited some of Gordon's books, a vise, and the history-making Halford flies, which he later presented to the Anglers' Club of New York.

Roy and I talked about other Neversink greats of Gordon's time: Reuben Cross, whose works on flytying have become handbooks, and Herman Christian, hard-fishing neighbor of Gordon's. As a youngster I lived a few miles from Christian, in the Rondout Valley. The Christians, in those horse-and-buggy days, were patients of my doctor-father. Herman's fishing skill was *(continued on page 158)*

Courtesy Roy Steenrod

It all started with Theodore Gordon, shown above on a favorite stretch of his beloved Neversink. Below, Ray Smith works at his trade in Mt. Tremper, on the Esopus

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(continued from page 154)

flats again. Out there, on the ebbing tide, he slid it back in the water and watched it swim away.

"Maybe I'll catch him again next year," Foth said. "And he'll go fourteen pounds or better."

The top fish ever landed on a fly was taken farther down the Keys by Hagen Sands of Key West. Sands, fishing a flat near Boca Chica, landed a bonefish that weighed 14 pounds 2 ounces.

In Florida waters bonefishing is best from April through July. But October, November, and December also are good, except during really cold spells, and bigger fish seem to come in at that time.—*Joe Brooks.*

CATSKILL FLYTYERS

(continued from page 67)

the envy of all us kids who were just beginning to catch the fishing bug.

Another Neversink notable was Edward Hewitt, creator of the Neversink Nymph and the Neversink Skater, a sparsely-tied spider. Hewitt was no disciple of Gordon's, however; he was too much a flinty individualist.

Hewitt's dislike of government people carried over to struggling young fisheries biologists, so he was never hooked on me. I told Roy about the time I was invited to sing for my supper at a fishing-club dinner.

I was seated between the late Edward Hewitt and George La Branche, occasional Catskill angler who concocted his famous fly, the Pink Lady, on the Willowemoc in 1899. These elder statesmen of angling started lambasting me about New York's stream-stocking policy but wound up in a heated debate with each other, putting me in a withering crossfire of the wildest how-to-catch-'em theories I'd ever heard.

From Roy's place I took some of my favorite back roads to Art Flick's. The Sage of the Schoharie was in his office-workshop. A tying vise was conveniently fastened to his desk.

Art's star has been shining brightly since the publication of a revised edition of his book, Streamside Guide to Naturals and Their Imitations. A slim volume, like the first edition of Walton's book The Compleat Angler, the Streamside Guide is just the size to fit in the pocket of a fishing vest, and its list of a dozen flies will put a beginner in business on any trout stream in the Northeastern U.S.

Of all the Catskill coterie, Art probably gets in the most fishing. He doesn't tie for the commercial market, and for over 25 years he has spent part of almost every day of the season on Schoharie Creek or his beloved West Kill, a few casts from his doorstep—except for the three seasons he spent collecting insect specimens for his book.

Art reflected on his collecting days.

"You know," he said, "sometimes it's harder to catch an insect than a trout—especially on those days when blue winged olives or pale evening duns are taking off as soon as they come to the surface."

Art is another true believer in matching the hatch. The fancy attractor flies are not for him.

"I'm probably the only flytyer in the country who has never tied a Royal Coachman," he remarked.

Art gives credit to many flytyers who helped him get started, especially the late Preston Jennings. It was Jennings who compiled the first American work correlating natural flies with their artificial counterparts.

"The greatest compliment I ever got on my tying," Art said as he whipped the finish on the Flick version of a Grey Fox Variant, his favorite fly, "was the time Preston told me, 'We have now reached a point where the pupil is doing a better job than the teacher'."

From Art's I went to Ray Smith's, a few Catskill country miles away in Mt. Tremper. Ray is to Esopus Creek what Art is to the Schoharie.

Although Ray ties commercially, he spends more time on trout streams than at the tying bench. In setting up a date for jawboning, he warned: "Be sure to let me know beforehand so I won't be out fishing."

In his upstairs workroom, looking out on a foam-flecked pool of the Little Beaver Kill, an Esopus feeder, Ray sat back in his chair and reminisced:

"I remember the first fly I tied—when I was about twelve. I'd heard fishermen talk about flies, so I took a snelled worm-fishing hook and tied on a bit of barred-rocked feather with Mother's sewing thread. Caught a trout first thing—and lots after. That fly changed my life. If I hadn't caught anything I'd probably still be a baitfisherman. Since then, I guess I must have tied over a half-million flies."

I glanced at Ray's vise. Welded and wired together, it confirmed the statement.

When it comes to flytying, Ray Smith, a match-the-hatcher and choosy about color, is a fairly orthodox member of the Catskill School. But when it comes to fishing, I think of Ray as The Compleat Iconoclast. He'll change from dry flies to wet flies at the drop of a hackle feather, and he spurns today's fad, the extra-long superfine leader.

Like most dry-fly anglers, I prefer a high-profile floating fly.

"You want 'em to ride down through like a haystack?" Ray asked with a smile.

I nodded.

"Well, the next time you're drawing a blank," he said, "get out your scissors and give your fly a good haircut. You'll be surprised how often it pays off."

The dry-fly fisher, Ray advises, will get action on the Esopus with a Quill Gordon in April and May, a Red Fox in June, and a small Olive Blue Dun during the summer.

"The patterns have stayed pretty much the same," Ray said, "but smaller fish—and some say more hatches of smaller flies—have created a demand for smaller sizes. For years it was tens and twelves. Now fourteens, six-

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teens, and eighteens get the big play."

"I'll be heading for Roscoe soon," I remarked, "to see the Dettes and Darbees. It will be interesting to see what the story is over there."

When I arrived in Roscoe, a March blizzard was swirling around. As the drifts piled up, I settled down with Walt and Winnie Dette in the cozy warmth of Keener's Pool, anglers' affectionate name for the bar in Roscoe's historic hostelry, Antrim Lodge. Bigger fish are caught in Keener's Pool than in any pool on the Beaver Kill.

"Funny thing," Walt said, with his typical corkscrew grin, "I learned to tie flies by untying them.

"When I moved to Roscoe from New York after World War I, Harry Darbee and I fished together a lot. At first we mostly used worms, but then we started to use flies and I wanted to learn how to tie them.

"Rube Cross was the big name in flytyers around here then. He was a big rawboned man, but those big hands sure turned out wonderful flies. I went to see him about giving me lessons. I was willing to pay, but Rube turned me down. So I ended up buying ten-dozen assorted patterns. Cost me thirty bucks —a lot of money for a kid then."

By taking each fly apart, Walt learned the makeup of every popular pattern of the day. He had a job in Sipple's Drug Store in the 1920's. Between mixing malteds and dispensing Lydia Pinkham's, he perfected his skill by tying flies under the counter.

Later Walt Dette and Harry Darbee teamed up in the business of tying flies and selling flytying materials. They set up shop over Roscoe's old movie theatre, the Criterion. On movie nights, Walt and Harry tied flies upstairs to the tinkling rhythm of a lively piano downstairs accompanying Douglas Fairbanks as he swung from chandeliers or Pola Negri emoting at her bosom-heaving best.

Winnie spoke up: "The boys were still doing a lot more fishing than flytying. They usually had good luck, and the word got around. Fishermen started knocking on the door for their flies."

Winnie was a Ferdon. Her family ran a country hotel on the Beaver Kill that catered to anglers. Ferdon's is the first pool below the Junction Pool, where the Beaver Kill and Willowemoc meet. Winnie learned to fish in Ferdon's Pool as a young girl, and Roy Steenrod tied his first Hendrickson on its bank, naming the fly for his fishing friend, Albert Hendrickson.

A Catskill romance bloomed in 1928, when Walt and Winnie were married. Soon they set up shop as flytyers. Business became so brisk that they asked Harry Darbee, who was living away from Roscoe then, to join them. Flytying continued to thrive, so Elsie Bivins, who lived across the street, came over to help out. Elsie was also born to the Catskill tradition, on Willowemoc Creek where she caught her first trout.

Another romance bloomed in the Catskills, and in 1935 Harry and Elsie were married.

"I got Elsie in my net, and she couldn't get away," Harry chuckled as I picked up the thread of the story at the Darbee's Livingston Manor home overlooking the Willowemoc. "That's when we started our own business."

Harry, who looks like a senator with his shock of silver hair, is endowed with the soul of a crusader. He has fought to protect Catskill streams from dambuilders, from roadbuilders, and on a few occasions from fisheries biologists.

I mentioned Ray Smith's comments about the demand for smaller flies to Harry.

"That holds true over here, too," Harry confirmed. "I think the fad for midge fishing also has a lot to do with it."

The lusty crow of a rooster changed our train of thought.

"We've raised our own birds since we started tying," said Elsie, who valiantly puts chicken on the menu as rooster after rooster fails to measure up. "Now our flock is a mixture of over twenty-five breeds, which gives us about forty shades of hackle."

To say that Catskill School tyers are finicky about color is a monumental understatement.

To most of us flyfishers, stiff hackle is the name of the game. But Ray Smith, always the iconoclast, says, "Beats me what you flyfishermen are trying to prove when you touch the hackle points of a fly to your lips. I'll sacrifice hackle stiffness anytime for the special shade I want."

For a Hendrickson, Art Flick demands pink belly fur from a vixen red fox—the special pinkish hue caused by urine stains!

"And you can't depend on it," Art complains. "Some vixens are so dainty, no fur is stained."

It's this better-feathered mousetrap that lures us flyfishers to their doors.

Being fussy pays off. Both the Dettes and Darbees are among the foremost flytyers in the world. They keep alive the vanishing art of using the hands; their nimble fingers have tied several million flies. The Darbees once filled an order for 3,000 dozen. Orders come from all over the U.S. and from other countries including Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and Argentina.

The fame of these Catskill tyers comes not only from the quality and quantity of their flies but also from their imaginative creations. Among other patterns, Walt Dette developed the Coffin Fly, Harry Darbee the Rat-Faced McDougal. Both men, with a flytyer's noblesse oblige, credit fellow fishermen for helping in the thinking-up stages.

Catskill School tyers continue to stream-test old standbys and innovations as Gordon did. As Harry Darbee puts it, "All of us, you know, were fishermen before we were flytyers, and we're still fishermen."

In the Catskill School proving grounds, what happens on the business end of the line is what counts. And that, after all, is what flytying is all about.

THE END

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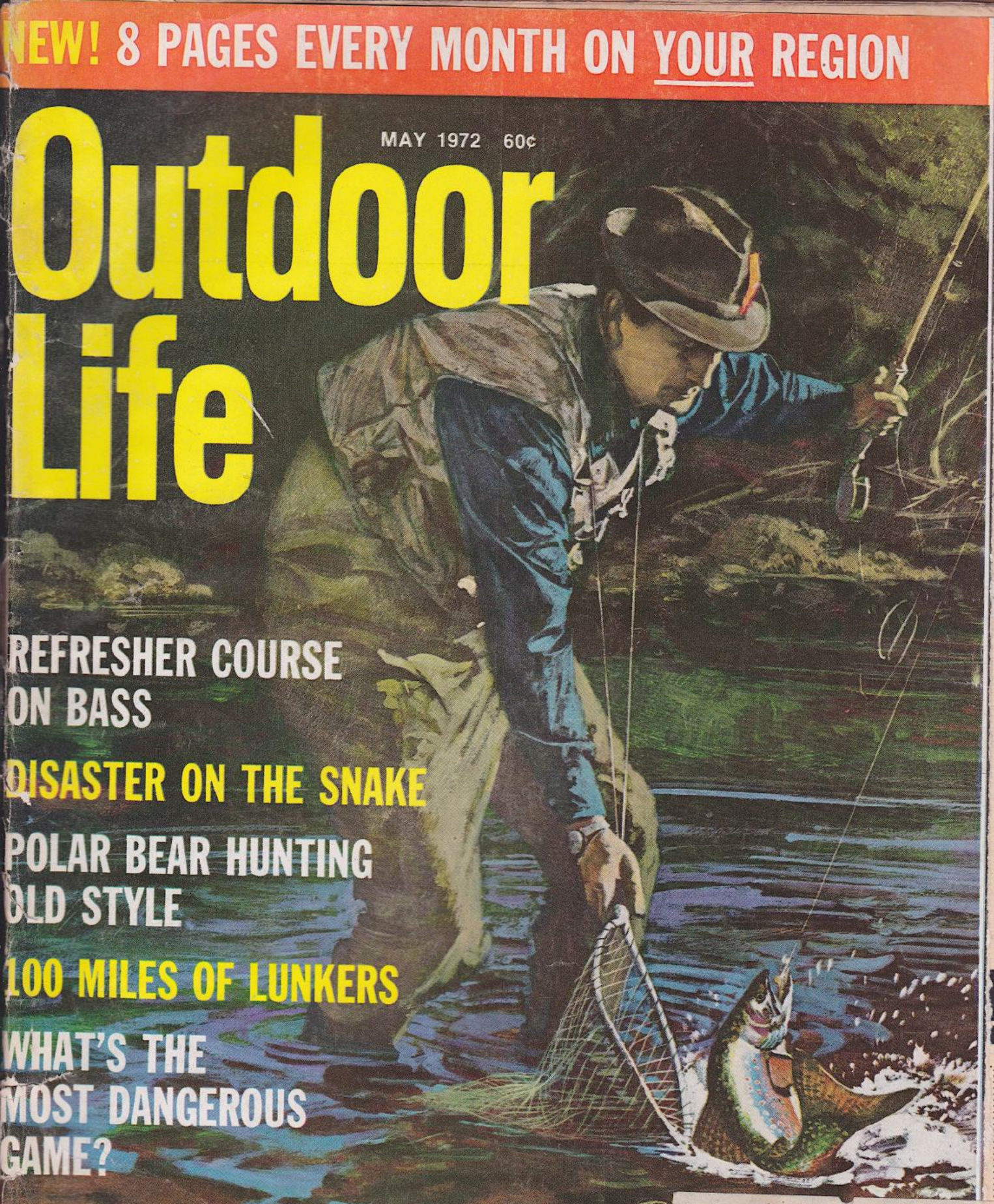

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